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ABSTRACT

In discussions of media education, mass communication educators have allowed the professional media industry to define the boundaries of dialogue, leaving the academy to respond, defend, and rationalize. This approach has allowed the professional industry to operate for too long under three gross and inaccurate assumptions: (1) that educators have little sense of what best prepares students for the industry; (2) that higher education is responsible for generating their entry-level job pool; and (3) that trade skills and vocational training are parts of the university's mission. Mass communication educators must quickly and convincingly deal with these misdirections, and establish clear reasoning for a new agenda for the mass communication discipline in the academy. The politics and finances of today's university may be the catalyst for media education to establish its position where it rightfully belongs anyway: in the liberal arts. Media courses should be designed to contribute to a student's ability to express ideas in speaking and writing, to reason, to organize, and to have a wider understanding of society. Viable for major and non-majors, courses should focus on the "why" of media processes, rather than on the "how to." To implement the redirection of media study, the discipline must redefine its educational objectives in structure and curriculum, and in faculty hiring. Beyond the department, professionals can provide their real world expertise to students through a variety of non-classroom avenues that can generate potential practitioners. (PRA)

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"MASS COMMUNICATION EDUCATION BELONGS TO THE UNIVERSITY"

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Media professionals have never been hesitant to tell mass communication educators what should be happening on college campuses. Professional media conventions routinely feature programs and panels that evaluate the status of media education. A particular program at the 1990 Society of Professional Journalists convention in Louisville was entitled, "What the Industry Expects - and Gets from Journalism Schools."¹ Among the questions raised for this program in the convention brochure were, "How well are journalism schools doing in preparing graduates for media careers?," and "What do the media expect graduates to know?" With this setup, the predictable points emerged from the audience. For example, several professionals said students must be "trained" to be ready for the industry. This, they asserted, requires a certain degree of skills courses. Another professional even claimed that the industry has a "right" to expect journalism graduates be able to type well. It was pointed out that newspaper publishers in Colorado are working to develop their own outcomes assessment for college graduates seeking entry level jobs.

On another front, several key professional media organizations sponsored the now infamous Roper report, which, among other things, concluded that media educators were out of touch with the "real world," failed to give students suitable "hands-on" training, and

¹Society of Professional Journalists national convention. Louisville, Kentucky, October 12, 1990.

allowed students to live with unrealistic career expectations.² Professional involvement in accrediting mass communication programs and in serving on such boards as the Broadcast Education Association are further evidence of direct professional influence on college programs.

As any college debater knows, a key to furthering one's own propositions is to direct the discussion on one's own terms and conditions. It would seem mass communication educators are clearly failing on this point. Educators have allowed the professional industry to define the boundaries of dialogue, leaving the academy to respond, defend, and rationalize. In a blunt sense, educators may have been pandering over the years to a professional audience that is impossible to please. Unfortunately, this approach has allowed the professional industry to operate for too long under three gross and inaccurate assumptions. First is the assumption that educators have little sense of what best prepares students for the industry. Second, professionals assume that higher education is responsible for generating their entry-level job pool. And third, pros assume that trade skills and vocational training are parts of a university's mission. Mass communication educators must quickly and convincingly deal with these misdirections, and establish clear reasoning for a new agenda for the mass

²"Electronic Media Career Preparation Study: Executive Summary," The Roper Organization Inc., December 1987. The three major organizations commissioning the study were the International Radio and Television Society, the Radio-Television News Directors Association, and the National Association of Television Program Executives. The Gannett Foundation provided additional funding for the study.

communication discipline in the academy. In short, it is time to get the defense off the field, and send the offense in with a new playbook.

Creating the case for change

Mass communication educators must first get the word out that they do, indeed, understand what professionals want from colleges and universities. A recent study by Paul Matney is another fine, scholarly effort to compare professional and academic perceptions of how to prepare future broadcast journalists. The good news is that there is "remarkable rank order agreement between news directors and educators regarding educational needs of television reporters."³ This sort of work should reassure professionals that their input has been made and recognized.

But the next step in the redirection process is bound to be more difficult and controversial. Professionals (and too many faculty, it must be pointed out) need to be made aware that curriculum reform is coming and it likely will not be in ways that the industry would endorse. The impending reforms will move mass communication education away from skills concentration and toward a more theoretical, conceptual, and critical study. Such movement is certain to heighten the education bashing from the professional industry. Educators will have to delineate the essence of the changes.

³J. Paul Matney, "A Comparative Study of the Educational Needs of Television Reporters as Perceived by Television News Directors and Broadcast Education Association convention. April 14, 1991, Las Vegas, Nevada, p.2.

University politics and finances

From a practical standpoint, mass communication programs must respond to university-wide efforts to consolidate areas of study and return to basics. The J-school approach has been plagued over the years by fragmentation and crass vocationalism. Many media programs feature narrow sequences in news-editorial, broadcasting, advertising, public relations, photojournalism, magazine, etc., all designed to provide career-specific training for entry level jobs. This approach is bound to leave mass communication programs on the political and financial fringe at the respective universities. The problem was identified as early as 1983 by Everette Dennis, who wrote, "On campus, by any economic measure, journalism schools are second- or third-class citizens. They have massive enrollments and tiny faculties..."⁴ Trinity University's Bob Blanchard says, "...Academic politics is the most compelling reason why journalism schools should teach more liberal arts courses. The real power on campus is held by academic committees who look on skills-based journalism education as vocational training."⁵

Today's university expects each area of study to contribute to the academic environment of the entire campus. Typical J-school skills courses directed at vocational preparation can hardly meet

⁴Everette E. Dennis, "Journalism Education - Storm Swirls on Campus; Changes Coming," Pressline, September, 1983. As Appendix D in "Planning for Curricular Change in Journalism Education," University of Oregon, May, 1984

⁵Ron Thornburg, "The Liberal Arts and Sciences: How Changes are Influenced by Student Needs," in ASNE Education for Journalism Report, April, 1990.

this challenge. Media courses should be designed in a fashion that could make them viable even for non-majors. By participating in this new convergence process, media educators better position their departments to meet the overall mission of a university. Mass communication departments will pay a high price in lost funding, faculty, and respect if they are not sensitive to overall campus initiatives.

Media Study in the Liberal Arts

The crush of practical university politics may be the catalyst for media education to establish its position where it rightfully belongs anyway -- in the liberal arts. Stewart Hudson has carefully established how the study of mass communication fits a traditional definition of liberal arts. "...similar philosophic assumptions stemming from the oratorical and empirical natural rights theorists undergird both the speech and mass communication areas and classical liberal arts."⁶

It is also easy to establish that, with media impact being so pervasive, any liberally educated person should have an appreciation and understanding for mass communication processes and effects. Media understanding is as important for consumers of mass messages as it is for the practitioners.⁷ The same rationale

⁶Stewart Hudson, "Communications Oratorical and Natural Rights Heritage and the Liberal Arts," ACA Bulletin, Issue #64, April, 1988, p. 14.

⁷See Jeffrey McCall, "Sharing the Responsibility of Media Literacy -- Reach Out to Other Disciplines," paper presented to the symposium "Professional and Liberal Education: An Agenda for Journalism and Mass Communication," Trinity University, San

prevails for other liberal studies, such as, English literature, sociology, political science, philosophy, and others.

Liberal arts courses should contribute to a student's ability to express ideas in speaking and writing, to reason, to organize, and basically, to have a wider understanding of society. These functions can be clearly addressed in carefully structured media courses. Susan Eastman describes her conception of a liberal arts education and defines that media courses can serve a liberalizing function.⁸ Media courses should focus more on the "why" of media processes rather than the "how to." For example, it is easy to see that a course dealing with appreciation for language, ethics, legal implications, and societal impact be a liberal arts type course. These issues should clearly surface in a broadcast journalism course. But for many (including the ACEJMC, apparently), a broadcast journalism course should still be considered a vocationally based, "news technician" class.

Media professionals need not fear this changed emphasis. The "how to" can still be learned through cocurricular activity in student media, in internships, or in (dare it be said) orientation training for new employees. It could also be argued that this sort of education should make for the more enlightened and enterprising practitioners.

In addition, the student educated in the liberal arts

Antonio, Texas, February 20, 1987.

⁸Susan Tyler Eastman, "A Model for Telecommunications Education," paper presented to Central States Speech Association convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, April, 1986.

framework is more versatile for alternative career opportunities. Media educators have an obligation to provide all students with a foundation for lifelong functioning. A vocational program of study is less helpful for those many students who will work in non-traditional media, move out of media work in to another career, or never find suitable media work in the first place.⁹

Ultimately, when mass communication educators operate under industry assumptions outlined previously, they guarantee themselves continued second-class status in academia, with the resulting political and financial slights. They also compromise liberal education opportunities for future practitioners and consumers alike. And most damaging, they spurn their rightful place in the liberal arts in exchange for concern over industry wishes that are narrow and self-serving.

Implementing the redirection for media study

Mass communication education must unabashedly release itself from the academic fringe by rejecting blatant careerism and engaging in those activities that integrate the discipline into mainstream academia. The discipline must first redefine its educational objectives, then articulate them to the various professional and academic constituencies. This bold redefinition can be realized through several key areas.

⁹See Jeffrey McCall, "Beyond the Roper Report: Maintaining Goals to Educate (Not Train) Students," paper presented to Broadcast Education convention, Las Vegas, Nevada, April 28, 1989.

Structural and curriculum revision

Educators should first work to reestablish commonalities within the subareas of the field. Mass communication or journalism departments should pull in the reins on a proliferation of tracks, and develop core areas of understanding dealing with the process of communication. Essentially, the departmental mission should be to educate students in the theory, analysis, and criticism of mediated messages, and not narrowly educated students to be print reporters, television producers, or advertising copy writers. Students with an understanding of mass communication can apply that insight in a variety of eventual career tracks. The search for commonality should also be extended to speech communication, where the fundamental roots of mass communication are located, and where colleagues have much to offer media students and faculty in such areas as persuasion, ethics, free expression theory, and political communication.

Individual courses should be rescrutinized to insure a liberal approach to learning. Media law courses need a clear philosophical and theoretical bent, and not the "here's how to avoid a libel suit" approach frequently found. Communication ethics can be taught in a values framework, and not from the standpoint of getting around practical problems. Production courses, too, while carrying a certain technical element, should first focus on message and aesthetic components. This course redefinition effort could be challenging and time consuming. But the process of pushing reworked course descriptions through university administrative

channels is a great opportunity for the department to define its new role in liberal education before the relevant university powers.

Faculty hiring to support redirection

Next, mass communication departments should look to hire faculty that will be able to carry out a media studies approach. These new faculty should be asked to carry the same academic credentials as faculty in other liberal arts departments, and should be evaluated at review and tenure time according to the same standards. Too many journalism departments, over the years, have labored to hire and evaluate faculty on standards separate from the rest of the university. Even when they have succeeded, the credibility and image factors have been compromised. Achieving the proper place for the discipline in the academy, in terms of both prestige and resources, requires meeting the faculty qualifications of the entire university community. The twenty year insurance salesman might be great at what he does, but the economics department does not hire him to a tenure track position to teach financial theory.

This recommendation is sure to cause alarm in professional circles, where there is already a sense that "those who can't do, teach." But it must be remembered that the redirection being sought is not focused on "doing," but rather on understanding and analyzing. That function is most likely going to originate from graduate-degreed faculty, many of whom DQ have an interest in, and even ability in more practical media activities. Professionals

wishing to join the ranks of academia should look to acquire post-master's graduate work. They should be willing to endorse the notion that the university environment, such as it is, is not the place for a "war stories" and/or vocational approach to media study. Failing to endorse this notion will leave the educator-professional in a very precarious situation at tenure time, especially given the changing rigor of the process.

Integrating media study beyond the department

Media study, as somewhat of a crossroads discipline, is in a unique position to integrate with media-related concerns of other disciplines. Because the media are so pervasive and impact so many facets of our society, mass communication educators can break out of their vocational stereotypes through building collegial relationships with others departments on campus. These relationships could include team-teaching, joint research ventures, cosponsorships of colloquia, or cross-listing of courses with content relevant to both disciplines. Such efforts could make mass communication educators key players in the post-structuralist concept being considered in higher education. The topics for these linkages could range from current matters like media impact on Persian Gulf politics, to recurring issues involving morality and media, media stereotyping, government regulation, and so on. Media educators are then able to promote the cause of media literacy for the next generation of media consumers, thus playing a role for students beyond those seeking a media career.

The role of the professional industry

Another obligation of media educators in establishing new foundations is to clarify the expectations for the professional industry. None of the foregoing discussion should indicate that involvement from professionals is not important. Rather, the involvement should simply be on different terms, with different assumptions and expectations for the academy. First of all, professionals should take it upon themselves to guarantee their future applicant pools. Internship programs are important aspects of "reality learning" for aspiring pros. But these programs could, in many cases, use more oversight, structure, and financial aid. Professionals should proact in developing professional-in-residence programs where the practitioner could meet prospective employees while working together in student media organizations. Most universities could use help in financing week-long or semester-long residencies. The industry investment should be well worth it. Pros can also prepare and deliver job hunting and audition tape seminars. To put it bluntly, the possibilities are plentiful. This professional involvement in developing their own applicant pool places responsibility for reality and results where it probably always should have been. The industry should also be more aware and receptive to the research and writing coming out of universities. Such material could give professionals additional theoretical and analytical perspectives on the mass media process, and, perhaps a better sense of the role of media academics. It would be interesting to know how many professional shops keep

current editors of Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Journalism Quarterly, or another excellent work, Journal of Mass Media Ethics. Professionals in other fields consistently keep updated on scholarly work of universities.

In conclusion, each party must build on its own strengths. Educators must function effectively in a university structure, and consider the fundamental, educational needs of students. Professionals can provide their real world expertise to students through a variety of non-classroom avenues that can generate potential practitioners. It is difficult to redefine the roles of the respective parties, and many of the suggestions contained here might seem extreme. But media academics would be wise to break from the professional restraints now, while they can still impact the reform efforts in higher education. To delay dooms mass communication study to the fringe of that reform. Media education, the industry, and media consumers would all lose in that circumstance.